

THE TELEPHONE MAN

by Bailey White

Essie and Helen were two old sisters who lived together in their childhood home. And Arthur was a man with only one hand, who'd been in love with Essie for as long as anyone could remember. 'You know that one hand can do almost anything,' he said to Helen. They were in that house rolling out the living room rug, and Essie was out in the yard trying to mow a clearing in the tall weeds beyond the bird feeder with a little push mower. She wanted a vista, just like the one she'd seen at Birdsong Nature Center. But the grass was too thick, and the lawn mower kept choking down.

'The one hand has nothing to do with it, Arthur,' said Helen. 'You know that. It's just Essie. She's not a marrying woman.' 'And what the hand can't do, the knob can do,' said Arthur. Instead of the hook so famous in jokes and horror stories, Arthur had a wooden knob he'd carved himself out of a live oak knot. 'I can drive nails with it.' 'It's not the knob or the hand or anything at all to do with you, Arthur,' said Helen. Helen was the sweet one. Essie did everything the same way she mowed that grass, straight ahead and all screwed up with concentration.

The mower choked down again, and they watched Essie viciously pull the starter cord. The mower coughed and sputtered, and soon as it settled down to run, Essie shoved it into the tall grass: 'Mmm, rrr.' She was wearing a loose denim dress and black hiking boots. 'Mm,' said Arthur, 'it hurts me to hear a small engine labor like that. She needs more horsepower than what she's got. She needs a Yazoo or a Snapping Turtle. What she really needs is that old Gravely mower your dad used to have. Where is that old Gravely mower?'

That was the first day of fall, and that evening was the first cool night. Essie was bedded down in the sofa under a down quilt reading about a beauty line in the Singing Springs Nursery catalog. And Helen was painting a picture of lemons, waiting for the damp spot on the paper to be just right, so she could get the stippled skin of the lemon in just one stroke.

'It's painful to see how hard he works trying to please you,' she said to Essie. 'You admire big goldfish in the corner-house fountain, and Arthur digs a pond with that one hand and a shovel. You read a letter from Dorothy Wordsworth, and Arthur goes out and plants a hundred daffodils. Now you want a mowed vista, and Arthur's been out in the barn all afternoon trying to resurrect that giant mowing machine that's been sitting up on blocks since Daddy died.' 'Arthur plants everything too deep,' said Essie. 'You're too much alike, you and Arthur,' said Helen. 'You, neither one of you, give up on anything, even when you should.'

Then the telephone rang. 'I can't leave this lemon,' said Helen, and Essie was tangled up in the quilt. There were the four rings, then the digital-sounding voice they had for the outgoing message, then the tone. And a man's voice, deep and weary, said, 'Hey, baby, I know it's been a long time,' a sigh and a pause. 'Baby?' said Essie. And she sat up and leaned toward the telephone; her catalog slid to the floor. 'I know I done wrong,' the voice said. 'I just want to let you know I'm going to get out of this mess before long, and I'm sorry for what I done. Call me.'

`Poor thing,' said Helen. `He's got the wrong number, and he doesn't know it.' She took up her brush and stroked the yellow onto the shaded side of the lemon. Essie picked up her catalog and lay back in the sofa, but the pages had flipped from the A's to the Z's. And she lay there for a long time staring at the zanthosomas. `Baby,' she whispered. `Just probably some girlfriend trouble,' said Helen. `He'll get it figured out.'

The next morning, at first light, Arthur was back in the barn taking the mower apart. It was an old Gravely mower from the 1940s, and it had not run since Mr. Baker died in 1970. Rats had chewed up the wiring. The belts and tires were rotten and crumbling. And when Arthur opened the hood, lizards came skittering out. All morning Essie and Helen heard rattling and clanging, and at noon Arthur came in covered with grease, wiping his hand on a rag he had safety-pinned to his belt loop.

He had scrubbed all the gummed up oil out of the air cleaner with a toothbrush and laid it out on a rag in the sun to dry. And he'd taken the carburetor apart and had the float bowl, the needle valve and the sediment bowl soaking in a coffee can of kerosene. Essie and Helen came out and stood with their hands clutched against their bellies and peered down at the mower. `Lookit here,' said Arthur. `This is the whole fuel system all varnished up from old gas. I've got to get this cleaned up and cut a new gasket for the sediment bowl and the carburetor. I've got to get all this rust and trash out of the gas tank and see--can I get some fire out of this magneto. Then this old Gravely will mow anything you want mowed. This is a fine, fine machine. This old Gravely will mow down all those little sweet gums coming up in there, all that sumac, that bahia grass that would choke down any other mower. This Gravely will mow it. I'll mow the whole thing right up to the fence wire.'

`No,' said Essie, drawing shapes in the air with her arms. `I just want a swath from the bird feeder, curving around the camellia bushes and out into the sunny place, just like at Birdsong.' `Arthur, quit working on this old thing,' said Helen. `It's too much for just that little bit of mowing. Essie can get Randy to come over with his bush hog on Saturday and mow that strip for \$25.' `He'd scalp it,' said Arthur. `You watch, I'll have this thing purring like a kitten by Saturday. This is a fine old machine. They don't make them like this anymore.'

That night when the breeze would blow just right, they could smell a whiff of gasoline through the open windows. Essie was in the living room, and Helen was in the kitchen making a tomato sandwich when the telephone rang. But Essie didn't answer it. She stopped and stood in the middle of the room through the three rings, the outgoing message, then that voice, tired and sorrowful. `I'm in a bad place, baby. I need to talk to you.' `Essie, pick it up and tell that man we are not his girlfriend. He needs to check the number,' said Helen. `I want to hear this,' said Essie. `I'll make it up to you, baby. I swear I will,' said the telephone man. `Call me.'

The next morning Arthur was back, and he worked all that day and the next day with his mind the whole time on just two things: one, the Gravely mower; and, two, Essie. Every now and then a little shred of a thought would work its way to the surface, and he would be moved to sing out a word or a phrase. And all afternoon Helen and her little painting students on the porch were to hear, "Elberta Peach," or, "Ag Tires from Axelrod's," or, "Rave on."

For most of one afternoon he thought about a day 50 years ago out at Reed Pond, the day he fell in love with Essie and never got over it: Essie in her black bathing suit eating an Elberta peach. Arthur could bring that day up in his mind anytime he wanted to and see it just as clear, the pickerel weed and cypress trees on the far bank, the sparkle on the water, then the posts of the dock and the wet and the dry spots, then Essie and her laughing eyes, the way she looked at him right before her teeth sank into that Elberta peach, then moving on from there, his own hands on his knees--both of them in those days--and on Johnny Lovett's transistor radio that he was so proud out Buddy Holly singing "Rave on."

That day was the beginning of it, and everything had started changing on that day and never stopped changing from then on: Essie gone off to college and becoming a demonstrator; Helen in New York City, an artist; and Reed Pond called Mirror Lake with long grands where the cypress trees used to be and the houses all around it, each one as big as the Taj Mahal. Just one thing hadn't changed and never would change, even when he was fighting the war and she was marching up and down the streets of Madison, Wisconsin, waving a peace sign. He wrote Essie a letter every week and signed every one of them, 'Love, Arthur.' And when she took up with that dope-smoking Yankee artist, who drew pictures of little bright-colored people with big feet on every flat surface and Arthur got sent home with one hand--every time she came back, he would go over there and sit in her daddy's kitchen and say, 'Essie, I love you.'

Then there was that wispy California boy who'd called himself a musician, though all he did was a lot of strumming in two chords, long, long songs that didn't have any subject matter to them. Arthur knew how he'd treated Essie, and when she finally left him and came back home to get her bearings, Arthur came over and stood on the bottom step while she looked at him from behind the screen door with her face swollen and sad. Arthur said, 'If he hurts you, Essie, I'll kill him, one hand or no hands. You know I'll take care of you till the day you die because I love you.' But all Essie ever said was, 'Arthur, Arthur'--and she was gone again and stayed gone this time.

Helen was the one who had talked to him about it, saying over and over, 'She's not the marrying kind, Arthur,' and, 'She likes change and excitement, Arthur.' And probably the truest thing Helen ever said: 'You're an old friend, Arthur, and Essie likes things to be new.'

The first time Arthur ever heard of a bagel, Helen told him Essie was working in a bagel shop in Spokane, Washington. And when he saw one in a grocery store, he bought it and stood in the parking lot and gnawed and gnawed until he'd eaten the whole thing, just so he'd know what Essie was doing. Then Helen said she'd quit the bagels and was putting harpsichords together in Vermont; then in the bottom of the Grand Canyon living with Indians. There was a long gap of years, and finally the letter from Helen a year ago saying, 'Dear Arthur, we're two tired old-lady sisters, and we're moving back home.'

And there they were again, just like they'd started: Essie and Helen back in that house; Helen still painting her pictures and Essie with her gray hair all piled up and deaf in one ear. But Essie's still Essie. 'Now,' thought Arthur--and all year he dug fish ponds and planting daffodils and cleared out brush--'now,' he said, wiping his knob against his pants leg--'Now first thing tomorrow

morning, get those ag tires from Axelrod's, hook up the spark plug. She's got gas, she's got fire, she's got to run.'

He put up his tools, spread a tarpaulin over the whole thing and came up on the porch. The telephone was ringing. 'Arthur, come up here and let me fix you a cup of coffee,' said Helen. She called, 'Essie, get the phone. Arthur, come over to the sink. I'll wash your hand with some of this orange cleaner.' The telephone rang again, but Essie didn't answer it. She sat down in a chair in the middle of the room with both her feet on the floor and her elbows on her knees, leaning towards the telephone. 'I'm in a real dark place,' the voice said. 'Baby, please call me.' Then there was the click and the dial tone.

For a while they just stood there, not saying anything, Helen holding the tub of orange cleaner at the sink and Arthur wiping his knob with the greasy rag over and over. Then Arthur said, 'No, thank you, Helen. I'll just go on home.'

The next day was the perfect fall day, bright and cool, with a high blue sky and the welcome smell of a change of season, The tea olive trees in the first full bloom, scuppernong grapes and pine straw heated up by the sun and soon, with all of that, the smell of mown grass. From the house, Essie and Helen could hear the Gravely mower running just as smooth, and from the porch they could see through the great myrtle shade out into the sunny place Arthur perched up on the sulky behind the Gravely mower looping around and around, mowing just the shape Essie had drawn in the air, first his back on the loop going out, then his face on the loop coming back, every now and then turning to look over his shoulder at the mowed stripe unfurling behind the mower like a green grosgrain ribbon.

On the porch, Helen finished her lemon picture and propped it up on the railing to look at it. The hardest part had turned out to be the best, a place where the knife had sliced too deep, and it seemed you could look down through the clear layers of yellow and into the deep heart of the lemon. Essie finished filling out her order form, three abutilons from Singing Springs Nursery, and still they heard the mower near and far and near again, then farther and farther away.

'Seems like he's been mowing a mighty long time for that little bit of field,' said Helen. 'We need to go out there and admire it for Arthur.' 'We need to go out there and be sure he hadn't mowed everything down,' said Essie. 'You know how he is.' They walked out just the way the eye was drawn into that garden, through the dappled shade of the great myrtle, around the dense green of the camellias and into the sunny place.

'Oh, good,' said Helen. 'Arthur's taking a rest in the shade.' 'But the mower's still running,' said Essie. 'He's probably scared to shut it off for fear it won't start up again,' said Helen. 'Arthur, it's beautiful,' she called, 'absolutely beautiful.' But Arthur wasn't taking a rest. Arthur was lying stone dead, half in the shade and half in the sun, right where he'd fallen off that Gravely mower when the heart attack hit him. He was stiff. And the part of him that was in the sun was warm, and the part of him that was in the shade was cool.

After all the gasping was over and the cries of 'Arthur, oh, Arthur' and the hopeless attempts of resuscitation and a little weeping, Essie and Helen tried to turn Arthur over to get him into a

more lifelike position. But his knees buttressed him, and he wouldn't roll. They gave up and just stood there looking down at him lying on the mowed grass, just like they looked down into the engine of the Gravely mower with their hands clasped at their bellies. His eyes were open, and he had a look on his face of wonder and delight, as if he'd just bitten into something unexpectedly good.

'I'll stay here with him,' said Helen. 'I'll cover him up with something. You go call that cousin in Woodberry and 911 or whoever you're supposed to call.' Just as Essie came around the great myrtle tree, the telephone started ringing, and by the time she got to the porch steps, there was that familiar voice talking on the answering machine. Essie was not the kind to cry, but now the tears began to flow. She picked up the telephone and, without any greeting or pause, she cried out in a rough, choked voice, 'Arthur is dead, and no one at this number wants to hear from you ever again.' Then she slammed the receiver down and banged out the screen door and sat down on the steps.

Out through the vista she could just see Helen sitting on the mowed grass, and there they sat for a long time, two old ladies clutching their knees with a dead man between them. And in the background the sound of the Gravely mower, first a steady hum, then a sputter and a cough as it ran out of gas, then just birdsong, a cardinal calling from the feeder, the loud tweet of a wren in the tea olive tree. Then, in the distance, the thin, wavering whistle of the white-throated sparrow, the first one of the season.